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SUBJECT: TRANSPORT MINISTER ON CAMAIR, PORT PROJECTS

11. (SBU) Summary. Competing interests within the highest levels of the Government of Cameroon (GRC) continue to fight for control of Cameroon's national airline, rebaptized CAMAIRCO, implied Gounoko Haounaye, Cameroon's Minister of Transport, in a January 29 meeting with Emboffs. Haounaye praised the USG as uniquely principled and honest among Cameroon's foreign partners. Haounaye tried to explain the strategic vision behind the GRC's ambition to construct deep water ports at Kribi and Limbe while maintaining existing facilities at Douala, but we were left all the more concerned that the Kribi Port, one of Cameroon's most important development projects, suffers from the lack of leadership and accountability that bedevils so much in Cameroon. End summary.

Getting CAMAIR Off The Ground

12. (SBU) Haounaye told Poloff that, although President Biya had recently appointed a French national to serve as CAMAIRCO's general manager, the GRC continued to debate competing visions of CAMAIRCO's future. The GRC would like to identify a strategic partner who can help CAMAIRCO restart its operations over the next two to three years, after which time the GRC would reevaluate the prospects for privatization. Haounaye said the GRC purchased one Boeing 767 that it had been leasing from American company Ansett Aircraft. Haounaye said some GRC officials were advocating that the GRC purchase additional aircraft through intermediaries (and implied they were motivated by personal gain), but that he had tried to contact Boeing directly through their website.

Buy American, But Shop Smart

13. (SBU) Poloff expressed the USG's eagerness to provide the GRC with information on American companies with the experience and qualifications needed to fulfill the GRC's vision for CAMAIRCO. In an implicit reference to recent media reports that an American entity of uncertain bona fides was using personal connections with senior GRC officials to insinuate itself into CAMAIRCO's future, Poloff assured Haounaye that, as much as we want to "sell American," the USG would not encourage the GRC to partner with a subpar firm just because it happened to be American. Haounaye thanked Poloff for the USG's principled partnership and admitted that he had been approached by less-than-reputable agents angling for a slice of CAMAIRCO's business.

Kribi Port: Full Speed, But to Where?

14. (SBU) Poloff explained that the Embassy was seeking to make sense of the GRC's ambition to build new deep water ports at Kribi (in Cameroon's Francophone south) and Limbe (in the Anglophone Southwest Region) while maintaining the current estuary port at Douala. Haounaye said the GRC planned to move ahead with the Kribi project as a modular development, meaning that different entities would build and operate different components of the port. Hence the Australian company Sundance had been given the lead role to develop

a pier for the shipping of iron ore, and Rio Tinto was assigned responsibility for the aluminum facility. Haounaye said the GRC would continue to have shallow-draft ships use the existing Douala port and envisioned the Kribi port complex as serving as a container transshipment facility.

Comment: An Airline That Doesn't Fly
A Port Plan that Doesn't Float

15. (SBU) Haounaye is favorably disposed towards the United States and widely perceived as generally clean and competent; his promotion to the cabinet was driven by his effectiveness as Governor of the Littoral Region. He comes across as more actively engaged in his portfolio than many ministers, but equally hamstrung by the lack of clear delegation of responsibility. His description of the GRC's internal wrangles of CAMAIRCO makes clear that the national airline is still seen by many as an income source to be tapped rather than a national service to be rendered.

16. (SBU) Haounaye's efforts to explain the GRC's strategy for the Kribi and other port facilities left us with more questions than answers, an illustration that the GRC sorely lacks for an overarching strategic vision. More than mere infrastructure investments, Cameroon's competing port projects are enmeshed in complex and competing political and commercial interests. Despite pressing economic development needs, the GRC has not yet made a definitive decision about how to proceed and, more importantly, who is in charge. End comment.

Garvey